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The Ayatollah's Addled Allies

Our society only seems able to recognize evil in the rearview mirror.

By Kathleen Hayes

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In "Terror and Liberalism," Paul Berman tells the curious tale of the French Socialists who ended up supporting Nazism. The French Socialist Party, led by prime minister Léon Blum, was largely horrified by Hitler in the mid-to-late 1930s and thought France should prepare for war; but Blum's faction didn't represent the entire party. Another, slightly larger faction, led by Paul Faure, considered themselves brave, honest humanitarians and nuanced thinkers. Although they took a dim view of Hitler, they shuddered at the thought of another great war and thought everything should be done to conciliate Germany. These anti-war Socialists listened to Hitler's speeches and agreed that Germany had been wronged by the Treaty of Versailles and that Germans in Slavic countries were being treated badly, just as he said. The world, they observed, is complex. Only simpletons and right-wing jingoists see the world in black-and-white, good-and-evil terms.

Being progressive, sophisticated people, the anti-war French Socialists were disgusted by Hitler's crude antisemitism. But, they mused, here too they must concede that Hitler's charges contained some truth. After all, he railed against Jewish financiers; as Marxists, they opposed financiers. Some financiers were Jewish. Surely it should be possible, they objected, to criticize the Jews without being vilified as antisemites. And wasn't it suspicious that Blum, a Jew, was so eager to bring France into war? Above all, France must not return to the senseless carnage of World War I.

So the anti-war Socialists argued until May-June 1940, when Germany invaded France. The French far right proposed accepting the Nazi invasion and setting up a new government to collaborate with the occupying forces. Blum and his supporters refused and either were sent to Dachau, or they joined the fledgling French Resistance.

The anti-war Socialists, however, true to their convictions, joined the pro-Nazi regime. They didn't see themselves as capitulators or cowards, and they certainly didn't believe they were remotely evil — assuming they even recognized the concept of evil. They claimed to be acting in the name of peace, idealism and brotherhood with the German people. They ended up helping to deport French Jews to the death camps.

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some things are worth fighting for — to show that actually there are times you must fight, no matter how terrible the consequences. Clearly, however, the lesson hasn't sunk in. This is shown by the nearly half-century of appeasement, naïveté, or even enthusiasm with which much of the West has responded to the Islamic Republic of Iran and other jihadist movements like Al Qaeda and Hamas. Our society only seems able to recognize evil in the rearview mirror.

Even the belief that certain political movements or people are rightly called "evil" fell out of fashion once the Nazis were gone. The Third Reich came to seem cartoonishly hellish, like something out of a children's story. The comforting belief arose that evil triumphed once but couldn't possibly again; to be on the safe side, however, good people would be hypervigilant for anything resembling a stiff-armed salute.

Yet many of these same men and women saw no reason to be particularly alarmed about a regime that organized Nuremberg-like rallies in Tehran pledging Death to the Jews and America; that funded and trained Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis to wage war on Israel, America and the West; that gloated over the slaughter of Oct. 7 and vowed to continue until Israel is eliminated.

Last weekend I attended my local "No Kings" protest in Pico-Robertson — not as a demonstrator, but because I wanted to see what it was like. I was pleasantly surprised by what I found: the upbeat mood, the American flags, the allusions to the Founding Fathers and the principles on which America was founded. This is our country too, was the message, and we have the right to express our opinion about the direction it takes. But it was striking how provoked people were about the military parade taking place in Washington, D.C. This was the catalyst for these nationwide protests, after all — to counter the parade. Demonstrators didn't simply oppose it out of kneejerk opposition to Trump, or because it was a waste of money, which might be reasonably argued. No, they were disgusted by the whole concept of a military parade. For America to be proud of its military and point to its role in defending freedom worldwide was seen as not only boorish, but Nazi-like.

To such people, there is no connection between the freedoms they enjoy and the seemingly grubby or shameful interests represented by the U.S. military. Their rights and comfortable lives have simply been passed down to them, like manna from heaven. They generally have nothing to do with the working-class men and women who serve in the military and, if they met them, would probably find them not just inappropriately patriotic, but suspiciously so — less enlightened than they about the nefarious interests pursued through American foreign policy.

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challenge to such people.

It's easier to condemn your own, privileged society than a faraway one made up of poor, oppressed dark-skinned people — even when those ostensibly benighted individuals are the fabulously wealthy sons of Saudi oligarchs. When some such men flew passenger planes into office buildings, or before that, held American diplomats hostage, good-hearted liberal souls were shocked and distressed but vowed to understand. Like the French anti-war Socialists, they listened to those their government called the enemy and concluded that some of what the turbaned men said contained some truth. Western society is alienating and soulless, they might have agreed; or American imperialism does run roughshod over the globe. We must conciliate these forces where we can, they pled; war will do nothing but provoke them.

So day by day, year by year, a sizable portion of Western society obsessed over its own sins and transgressions — systemic racism, historic crimes, microaggressions — while shutting their eyes to the horrors unfolding across the globe: the women beaten to death for showing their hair, or sold at the age of nine, or virtually enslaved in their husbands' homes; the gay people hanged from cranes; the endless gruesome executions of political opponents and young protesters. Of course these decent Americans considered these atrocities to be terrible. Nothing could be done about them, however, so there was no point in speaking up about them. Westerners who criticized Islam arrogantly claimed their societies' superiority, for the sake of suspect geopolitical interests.

So last weekend also brought out protesters like my former comrades, who took to the streets of New York, London and other cities to demand "Hands Off Iran" and declare that, as always, the Zionists and Western imperialism are the real enemy. The organizers didn't even have to make new signs; they were already plentiful in their storage rooms, ready for deployment any time a Western country threatened any response against Iran for any reason. Like their intellectual forebears, the French anti-war Socialists, these protesters had listened closely to their government's enemy and determined that they expressed important truths. Like the French anti-war Socialists, they began with a belief in human emancipation and peace and freedom, and ended by upholding one of the most tyrannical, threatening regimes on the planet.

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In striking Iran, Israel has displayed the moral clarity that's been so lacking these past several decades. They have acted for not only the Jewish people and the West but the best of humanity, including the much-suffering Iranian people. We can only applaud and thank and pray for Israel, and hope the world learns to see what's worth fighting for.

Kathleen Hayes *is the author of "Antisemitism and the Left: A Memoir."*

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